Joint Statement of
Mark Rey, Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment
United States Department of Agriculture
And
James Cason, Deputy Assistant Secretary
Department of the Interior
Before
House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
Concerning
Oversight of Wildfire Management

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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Tiarht, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Federal wildland fire management. Since the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) work closely together in fire management, the two Departments are providing a joint statement.

WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

The Departments take seriously and perform professionally and honorably protecting people and property from wildfire. Wildland fire and wildland firefighting are influenced by a complex myriad of factors. These factors include weather, fuel type, terrain, proximity to the wildland urban interface (WUI) and other highly valued landscapes, and managerial decisions made before and during fire incidents.

The President's Budget makes the protection of communities, the environment, and firefighters a priority and includes funding the full inflation-adjusted 10- year average for wildland fire suppression. In addition to the factors mentioned above, increasing firefighting complexity in recent years has also contributed to increased expenditures by the Departments, so providing for the higher costs of suppression is a reasonable and prudent action consistent with our protection priorities. As this Committee has pointed out, these costs have escalated dramatically: the inflation-adjusted ten-year average for wildland fire suppression of the two Departments, $1.3 billion, is nearly three times the FY 2001 level of $472 million. These increases in turn increase the 10-year average for wildland fire suppression, which is used in the Budget. Both the current and previous Administrations have used the 10-year average as a discretionary function because it provides a reasonable method of budgeting for an activity that is foreseeable but for which actual year-to-year obligations are both unpredictable and widely variable.

The Wildland Fire Management budget has grown to become a significantly large area of the resource work accomplished by the Departments. For example, the total Wildland Fire Management program now makes up over 48% of the Forest Service discretionary

budget request. Because the Budget reflects the Administration's commitment to reducing the deficit while meeting the nation's priorities, escalating suppression and fuels treatment costs—as well as other priorities—have to be absorbed within the Department's discretionary totals.

The Departments have adopted substantive management reforms to mitigate this cost trend. The Departments and other first responders have spent significant effort and resources over the past several years to coordinate capability, improve inter-governmental communication, and employ management controls to ensure effective response. At the same time we have increased attention to cost in these complex environments. These efforts are having an affect on suppression costs. For example, USDA saw a decrease of over $200 million on forecasted suppression expenditures in 2007 compared with 2006 even though the size of wildfires and acres burned were greater.

ADDRESSING WILDLAND FIRE RISK TO COMMUNITIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Dangerous fire and fuels conditions exist in many areas in the United States, and the Departments are acting to reduce hazardous fuels on high priority lands. In this effort we are guided by the National Fire Plan (NFP), the Healthy Forests Initiative (HFI), and the Healthy Forest Restoration Act. While increasingly complex landscapes complicate our wildfire suppression task, the Departments can and are aggressively treating hazardous fuels – the area we are most able to impact - to help reduce the risk of catastrophic fire to our communities, forests, and rangelands. The Administration appreciates the leadership provided by this Committee as we have worked to improve hazardous fuels reduction on the nation's landscape. The Budget provides $500 million in funding for hazardous fuels reduction, a level that is more than four times greater than when this Administration took office.

In addition to improving treatments, we collaborate with our local, state and tribal partners more than ever before. The effectiveness of these treatments in reducing wildfire severity and protecting property has been demonstrated time and time again. Several fires from last season, the Angora Fire in South Lake Tahoe, fires around the San Bernardino National Forest, and the complex fires in Florida and in Georgia around the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge illustrate this well. Accomplishments in this area are:

- From 2000 through 2007 the Forest Service and Department of the Interior land management agencies have treated over 25 million acres for fuels reduction on federal lands, including about 20 million acres treated through hazardous fuels reduction programs and over 5 million acres of landscape restoration accomplished through other land management activities.

- In 2007, despite a substantial national wildfire suppression workload, the Forest Service and DOI reduced fuels and improved ecosystem health on more than 4.7 million acres of land nationally, of which over 3 million acres were treated through hazardous fuels reduction programs and 1.7 million acres of land

restoration accomplished through other land management activities. Of the total, 2.5 million acres of treatments were performed in the WUI.

- USDA and DOI, in collaboration with our non-federal partners, continue to increase the community protection emphasis of the hazardous fuels program. Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) assist localities to reduce risk and set priorities. Over 1,500 CWPPs covering more 4,700 communities have been completed nationally or nearing completion.

- The LANDFIRE project has now been completed for the western third of the mainland United States. The data are being used in setting hazardous fuel treatment priorities. The Departments are also testing methods of modeling fire risk with LANDFIRE data to help better inform hazardous fuel treatment prioritization. In addition the Departments have begun allocating fuels reduction funds and measuring the effectiveness of those treatments in terms of wildfire risk reduction.

- In 2007, to more adequately demonstrate the benefits of fuels reduction treatments on fire risk, the Departments continue to measure changes in the Condition Class of Federal lands and we are currently working on metrics for forest health changes that will help demonstrate the outcomes of projects that remove fuels.

- Since the advent of the National Fire Plan in 2000, federal and non-governmental entities have collaborated operationally and strategically to improve fire prevention and suppression, reduce hazardous fuels, restore fire-adapted ecosystems, and promote community assistance. The 10-year Implementation Plan, with its performance measures and implementation tasks will guide the agencies to build on this success with our partners.

WILDLAND FIRE PREPAREDNESS

The early outlook for the 2008 fire season indicates wildland fire potential is expected to be higher than normal across much of the Southwest, Southern California, portions of the Great Basin, the Eastern seaboard, west Texas and Oklahoma, and the Southeast. Much of the Northwest will be wetter than normal this spring, helping to alleviate continued drought conditions. The amount of precipitation many areas receive in the early summer periods is an important factor in the severity of the fire season.

To prepare for conditions anticipated in the 2008 Fire Season, the USDA and DOI are working to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our firefighting resources. Fire managers assign local, regional, and national firefighting personnel and equipment based on anticipated fire starts, actual fire occurrence, fire spread, and severity with the help of information from the National Interagency Fire Center Predictive Services group.

Firefighting Forces

For the 2008 fire season, we will secure firefighting forces – firefighters, equipment, and aircraft – comparable to those available in 2007. More than 18,000 firefighters will be

available, including permanent and seasonal Federal and State employees, crews from Tribal and local governments, contract crews, and emergency/temporary hires. This figure includes consistent levels to 2007 of highly-trained firefighting crews, smokejumpers, Type 1 national interagency incident management teams (the most experienced and skilled teams) available for complex fires or incidents, Type 2 incident management teams are available for geographical or national incidents, and for the Forest Service, National Incident Management Organizations incident management teams comprised of professionals permanently assigned to teams, are available.

Aviation

The wildland firefighting agencies continue to employ a mix of fixed and rotor wing aircraft. Key components of the Forest Service 2008 aviation assets include up to 20 civilian large air tankers on federal contracts, along with up to 35 Type 1 heavy helicopters and 34 Type 2 medium helicopters on national exclusive-use contracts; 53 Type 3 helicopters on local or regional exclusive-use contracts, and 8 Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System units will be available for deployment subject to available military aircraft. Additionally, there are nearly 300 call-when-needed Type 1, 2 and 3 helicopters available for fire management support as conditions and activity dictate. Likewise, Interior will maintain a similar mix of aviation resources in 2008 to that used in 2007, relying on single engine air tankers and helicopters.

Both Departments will further enhance efficiency in the future as the Fire Program Analysis system is deployed this year. This system will provide an interagency investment analysis of initial response organizations, hazardous fuels, and large fire suppression. Trade-offs will be displayed between program components relative to performance metrics. The system will be used for fire planning and budgeting on an interagency basis beginning this year.

FIRE SUPPRESSION

The Departments' combined 2009 Fire Suppression requests equal $1.33 billion, nearly $194 million more than the current enacted. Our Departments do share concerns about the cost of fires and are committed to carrying through with reforms to contain these costs.

Many of the wildfire management reforms employed by the Forest Service and DOI are based on recommendations from USDA Office of Inspector General (OIG), the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, the Brookings Institution, and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports that examined large fire suppression costs. The Departments will continue to move forward to implement management controls and efficiencies developed in response to these recommendations. For example, one OIG report documented inequitable apportionment of fire protection cost-sharing between Federal and local entities in residential areas that abut national forests. In response, the Departments are renegotiating master protection agreements to clarify roles and ensure equitable and appropriate allocation of wildland urban interface firefighting costs between the agreement parties. The Departments have also adopted a policy of risk-informed management with Appropriate Management Response as its guide and will continue to

strengthen its implementation. The Departments will continue to work together on enhanced response and efficiency that comes from national shared resources and aviation resource cost management. Additionally, the Departments will develop and implement a science-based methodology to recognize treatment of hazardous fuels from unplanned wildfires.

In FY 2009, the Departments will continue to improve performance through attention to policy, training, oversight, decision support tools, and after action performance analysis. Management policy is set at the national level, and provides clear guidance for the role of federal firefighters in the wildland-urban interface and the strategies of Appropriate Management Response. The Forest Service will continue to provide mandatory training to keep agency administrators up to date on national policy. During an incident, the Forest Service's Chief's Principle Representative provides oversight, while decision support tools such as Rapid Assessment of Values at Risk, Fire Spread Probability components of the Wildland Fire Decision Support System, offer the incident commander information on fire spread probability, resource values at risk, and historic costs for similar fires. After action reviews, including use of the Stratified Cost Index, provide lessons and best practices to include in subsequent updates to management policy. The products of this performance improvement process will also enable the Departments to maintain Fire Preparedness resources within a joint $866 million program budget.

In 2007 GAO published a report, "Wildland Fire Management: Lack of Clear Goals and Strategy Hinders Federal Agencies' Efforts to Contain the Costs of Fighting Fires" which suggests that the agencies have not clearly defined objectives and policies as a means for reducing the costs of fighting wildland fires. We share the GAO's interest in increasing accountability for cost containment and have taken many steps forward. We believe that our 10-Year Strategy Implementation Plan, Office of Management and Budget PART Improvement Plan, Forest Service Strategic Plan, and new DOI Strategic Plan, along with the management efficiencies initiatives underway, collectively articulate a set of strategies, goals and measures for reducing costs of large wildfire suppression and improving hazardous fuels reduction, and demonstrate commitment to constantly improve performance, efficiency and accountability. However, in order to progress toward a comprehensive document to meet these goals, the Departments will work to develop an outline of a tactical plan to a cohesive strategy for fuels reduction and wildland fire cost containment.

THE 2007 FIRE SEASON

Fire activity in 2007 was above normal by many standards. Across all jurisdictions, wildland fires totaled more than 85,000 incidents burning over 9 million acres. Last Spring drought and high temperatures resulted in the burning of over 1.4 million acres in Florida and Georgia. The summer saw extreme fires in Utah, Nevada and Idaho with six of the year's largest fires occurring in these States.

Last year, the U.S. Forest Service spent nearly $1.4 billion on all fire suppression while DOI spent approximately $470 million on all fire suppression. We are pleased, that even in the face of such a long and severe fire year; we achieved 97 percent initial attack

success on all fires, a rate comparable to less severe years. We will strive to maintain that level. Although the 2007 fire season had 13 fires over 100,000 acres, and 33 days in Preparedness Level 5 – the highest level of fire activity during which several geographic areas are experiencing simultaneous major incidents, and major events in highly populated areas in Northern and Southern California, it also resulted in less money spent by the Forest Service on suppression than 2006, and fewer home destroyed – approximately 2,900 homes lost in 2007 compared with over 4,500 homes lost in 2003.

The dedicated focus on hazardous fuels treatments and other forest restoration actions are making a difference in the wildland urban interface and a commitment to cost containment strategies are producing results. The fires this fall in southern California are a good example of these points.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA FIRES

The southern California fires that occurred during the Fall of 2007 directly affected nearly one million people and caused impacts to hundreds of thousands more. Two hundred seventy one fire starts resulted in 20 large fires which burned over 500,000 acres in total. Each of these benchmarks has been surpassed only once in the history of California, during the fires of 2003.

Between 2003 and 2007, the Forest Service, Department of the Interior, and Natural Resources Conservation Service jointly spent $300 million on roughly 275,000 acres of fuel reduction in Southern California, including about $17 million worth of treatments on 16,000 acres where fuels was a secondary benefit of some other management action. Moreover, 75,000 acres have been treated on high-priority State and privately owned lands as a result of grants from the Forest Service, DOI and NRCS. These fuel treatments are designed to decrease fire severity, provide evacuation routes, improve effectiveness and expand tactical firefighting options, and ultimately make communities safer.

The 2007 California fires were truly an historic event, but we believe that investments and actions made by the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, state and local governments, non-governmental organizations, and private landowners combined with improvements in coordination resulted in lower loss of life and overall damage to property. The pre-positioning efforts, investments in hazardous fuels treatments and community capacity, and coordination between FEMA, CAL FIRE, the California Army National Guard, United State Marine Corps, and tribal entities paid off during the 2007 fires. These fires had more fire starts than the 2003 fires (271 compared to 213) and more large fires that escaped initial attack (20 compared to 14). However, the resulting damage was much less in 2007. Even though the large fires burned one day longer in 2007, the fires resulted in only 65 percent as many acres burned, 60 percent as many structures destroyed even in the face of an additional 189,000 new homes built in the seven county area in southern California since 2003, 60 percent as many firefighter injuries, and 40 percent as many civilian fatalities. Nearly 13,000 personnel responded to the 2007 fires, and there was not one firefighter fatality.

The agencies also deployed seven Burned Area Emergency Response teams to conduct emergency stabilization assessments and treatments in the aftermath of these fires. These teams addressed threats from erosion, flooding, and debris flows to municipal water supplies, cultural sites, and critical wildlife habitat. Having these resources in place allowed the Departments to further lessen the threats the people of southern California faced.

Many lessons were learned from the 2003 California fires. Between 2003 and 2007, coordination was improved between federal, state and local entities; millions of dollars were strategically invested in WUI hazardous fuels treatments; and countless hours were invested in development of Community Wildland Fire Plans. As a result, we were better prepared for the events of 2007 in southern California to deploy resources strategically, successfully and most important, safely. In the midst of a monumental natural disaster, homes and lives were saved as a result of federal investments, improved coordination with local and State entities, and the efforts of the interagency firefighting community.

CONCLUSION

This concludes our statement, we would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.